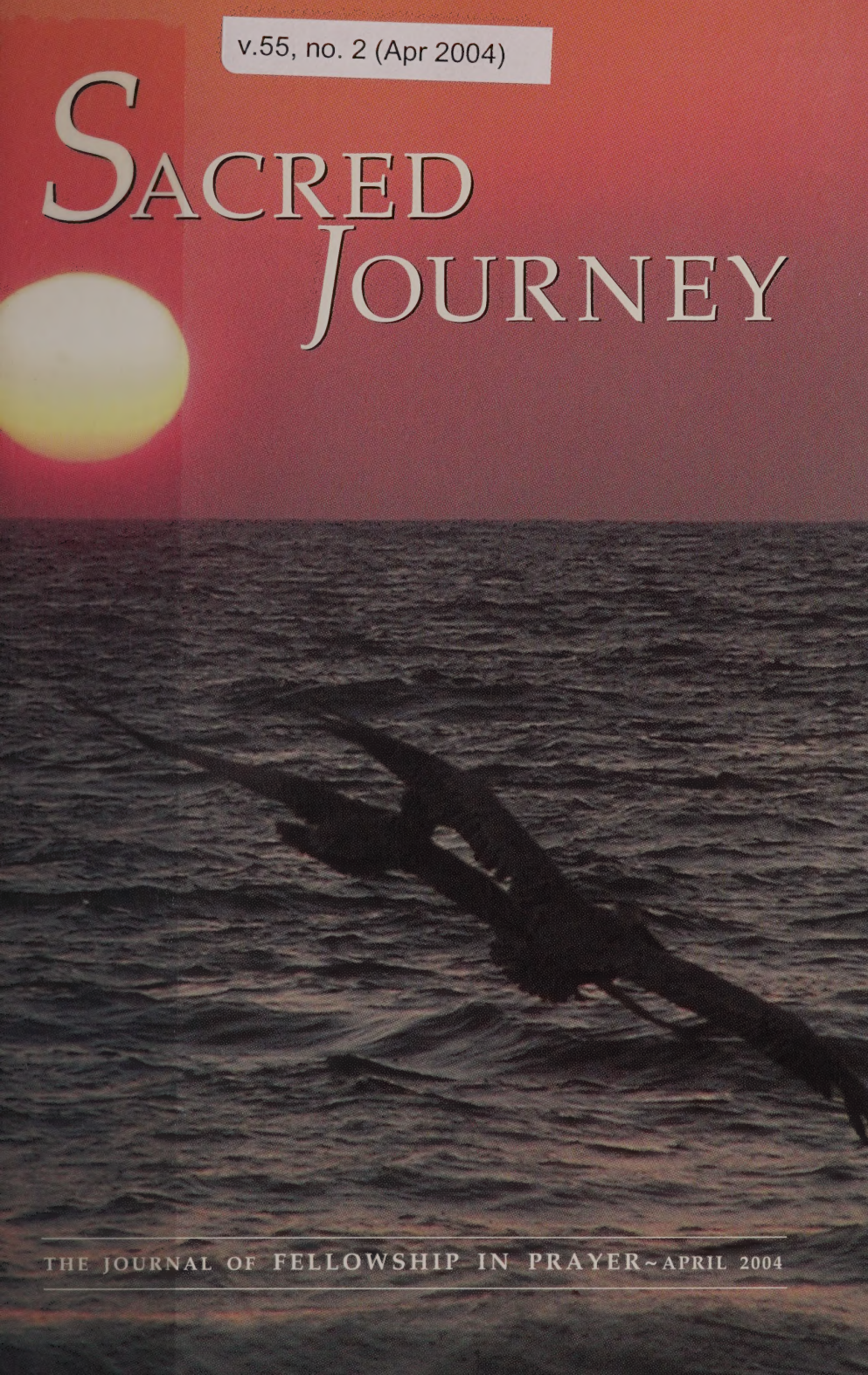
v.55, no. 2 (Apr 2004)

Sacred Journey



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to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

among humankind.

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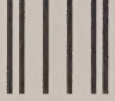

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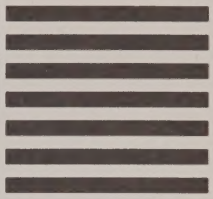

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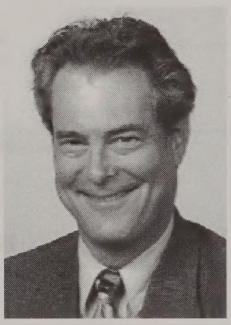
Pray for Peace



The world today is a dangerous place. Warfare abounds. Terrorism is rampant. Country fighting country. Religion against religion. We are increasingly frightened and concerned about our personal security. Every day in the news there are reports about the death and disfigurement of soldiers and civilians alike. We feel helpless. What can we do?

Many believe that the United Nations can lead the way to establishing world peace—but the Untied Nations has been largely ineffectual. However, Dag Hammarskjold, the esteemed, second Secretary General of the United Nations, gave us, as citizens of the world, guidance which is even more important today than it was in the 1950s when he delivered these words:

> "Man has reached a critical point in history, where he must turn to God to avoid the consequences of his own faulty thinking. We must pray, not a few of us, but all of us. We must pray simply, fervently, sincerely, and with increasing power as our faith grows.

We must condition the world's leaders by asking God's spirit to descend upon their hearts and minds. We must condition ourselves, each and every one, by asking God's help in living so that peace may be possible.

We must pray in church, at home, on the train, while driving, on the job—and keep at it. Each of us is important now. The ability of every individual to seek divine help is a necessary link in the golden chain of harmony and peace.

Prayer is a dynamic manifestation of love by the concerned, reaching out for God's help for man. You can help change the world by your prayers and your prayerful action."

This message conveys what is, to me, the essence of Fellowship in Prayer: not just enriching our own lives through prayer, but contributing to the greater good of all humankind. I ask each of you to follow the path illuminated by the words of Secretary General Hammarskjold. Let us all pray for peace.

LOUISE HUTNER / INTERIM EDITOR

Wings of a Butterfly

Some years ago I bought my six-year-old nephew a children's book—of a different sort. It's full of colorful illustrations, especially of butterflies, and it tells a meaningful story, as children's books often do. But the story is not one that most parents read to their children. The book is titled, *On the Wings of a Butterfly: A Story about Life and Death.*

My nephew, Sam, had leukemia and we had just been told that the final treatment, after 4 years of remissions and relapses, had failed. We had to prepare him for death, or so we thought. In the end, he prepared us, or tried. His courage and acceptance were far greater than ours; and that statement no longer sounds like a cliché to me.

April this year holds two major holidays, Easter and Passover. Christians celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection, and Jews celebrate their release from bondage in Egypt. An interfaith calendar for the month shows many other faith traditions' days of celebration as well. The thread common to all is one of renewal and hope, through life, and death, and life again.

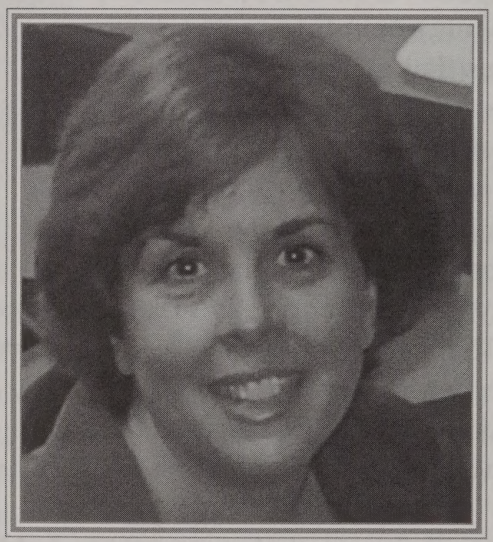
In our journal this month, Rabbi Maller asks one of life's most profound questions. The Torah tells us that we have a choice between life and death, and that we are commanded to choose life. "So how can there be any intrinsic value in death?" he asks. His search for an answer permeates the poems and photos he shares.

Both alone and together, we each seek our own answer to this question. In sharing our stories, we share glimpses of these answers. Several of our stories this month do speak of death, but in the most hopeful and beautiful of ways. While reminding us that death is not to be feared, they give us that most precious of gifts: the permission to choose life, and to savor every moment in peace and love and compassion.

In choosing life, we can also choose to deepen and strengthen our bond with the Eternal and perhaps, in the process, come to trust that the difference between life and death may be less, and less fearsome, than we have believed. The balance of our stories this month illustrates that connection to the Universal, the Divine, through the prayer and meditation experiences of seemingly ordinary people who have the courage to seek that bond in faith and trust.

The butterfly is a symbol of eternal life. In Mexico, when the Monarch butterflies begin migrating, people gather to celebrate because they believe the butterflies carry the spirits of those whose souls have taken wings. Each spring when the butterflies return to my area, I see Sam among them, coming by to visit me. He always reminds me to smile and laugh and, through my tears, to enjoy the beauty of this day—the beauty of this life.

Rebecca Laird



Moving On: An Interview With Rebecca Laird

Rebecca Laird served as the editor of Sacred Journey *from 1996 through this past year. She made many significant contributions that have shaped the focus and tone of the journal over these years. In the context of Fellowship in Prayer's mission—to encourage and support a spiritual orientation to life, to promote the practice of prayer, meditation, and service to others, and to help bring about a deeper spirit of unity among humankind—she strove to keep the journal, as the mouthpiece of the organization, focused on the personal, spiritual experiences and practices of people from a broad range of the world's faith traditions. In this way, she made this variety of faiths accessible to us all, giving us invaluable information and understanding of others' beliefs. This gift of sharing has done much to develop that deeper spirit of unity among humankind that we at Fellowship in Prayer find so important.*

Louise Hutner, the Interim Editor of Sacred Journey: The Journal of Fellowship in Prayer, *has worked with Rebecca for the last seven years and was delighted to conduct this interview.*

Sacred Journey: **So many of our readers have given such lovely feedback about you. They've come to know you well in your years at Fellowship in Prayer as you've shared your life with them. I'm sure they would enjoy hearing more about your background. Could you tell us something about your religious training as a child?**

Rebecca Laird: I was born to a minister father and a school-teacher mother in Indianapolis, Indiana. My older brother and I spent many hours each week during our childhood cosseted by a close-knit and conservative Christian community. We could belt out hymns and recite scripture from the time we could talk. When I was turning six, my parents moved us to Nampa, Idaho, a small western town in a lovely sagebrush valley surrounded by pine-covered mountains with a small Christian college where my father became a professor of religious education. The church we then attended was large and boasted a thriving children's program and youth group. I grew up with the benefit of lively friends and mentors at church who challenged me and really knew me. To get to the sanctuary of this church, I regularly passed a large mural of Jesus depicted as the good shepherd. I liked to imagine that I was the little lamb tucked under his arm. My memories of my religious education are filled with memories of good-hearted people who really did invest in me and modeled true faith.

Did you continue practicing your childhood religion into adulthood?

I trace my faith journey as a Christian to the time when I was seven years old and heard a minister tell me that Jesus wanted to be my friend. That call compelled

me then, and has continued through years laced with doubts, rebellion, and study that widened my perspective on the world and the multiple ways people search for meaning. I never have walked far from the friendship of Jesus or the love of God, but I am a questioner. I have wrestled with my faith and have learned that there are no easy answers. As an adult, I'm comfortable with mystery. I don't see much need anymore to defend my faith. I seek to live it out, albeit, imperfectly.

With your background as an ordained minister, what drew you to the publishing world?

Actually, it's the other way around. I was an editor and writer before I became an ordained minister. In my twenties I worked as a book editor for the religious books division of a major publishing company. There I learned from some of the finest authors, theologians, and sages from many denominations and religious traditions. That's where my religious understanding grew broad and deep. It also exposed me to many pioneering women in religion who helped me see that I was called to the ministry. Their strength of conviction and audacity helped me to stay on the long and winding road that led to my ordination.

Given your background in a conservative religious tradition, what was involved in your decision to join Fellowship in Prayer, an interfaith organization?

My publishing career has always been rooted in organizations that published thought-provoking and spiritually diverse material. In Fellowship in Prayer I found a terrific way to use my editorial skills and sensibilities in a way that fed my curiosity about spirituality in general. I find religious experience fascinating. To work with

people reflecting about their own spiritual encounters and beliefs is a privilege and something that informs my work no matter if it is in a publishing house or in a church.

How has your experience as the editor of *Sacred Journey* for the past seven years changed you?

Sacred Journey has made me confident of God's often unseen activity. I've read and talked to so many who tell of their own troubled times and of the inexplicable ways God has been present through a look, a touch, an insight, a serendipity or even a miracle. I believe God is working and present in the world and I don't have to understand or prove it all. I've simply been lucky to bear witness to the subtleties of the spirit in my life and in others.

Sacred Journey also taught me to respect the spiritual practices of all religious traditions. Human beings have human activities and postures we take to honor and make ourselves more receptive to divine encounter or enlightenment. We bow. We kneel. We pause. We detach from things to take up other things. We sing. We pray. We share food and stories. We find meaning and continuity in sacred texts. We go silent when things are beyond words. These are small things but not inconsequential things. These are some of the acts of human reverence and longing and they make life meaningful. As a Christian, I believe they help us receive the love of God.

In your work at Fellowship in Prayer you've met many influential spiritual leaders. Which ones have had the greatest impact on you and why?

Each one left me with an image or insight that continues to mark me. I treasure each issue I edited as a life lesson and gift received. Off the top of my head, I can

say Frederick Buechner reminded me that my life is a sacred journey and that the footsore steps I often take are rife with meaning and opportunity for insight if I'm paying attention.

Cardinal Cassidy from the Vatican and Rabbi Klenicki, of the ADL, showed me what true interfaith friendship and kindness look like. I saw true respect and enjoyment in their eyes when I talked to them about Jewish-Christian relations. I wish everyone could see that people who are living out their faiths with integrity can learn to love and enjoy each other.

Randall Balmer, professor of American Religion at Columbia became a friend who shared my evangelical heritage and love of the zoo of American religious life. Rather than prioritize one over the other, I began to see through his work how my faith tradition is a valuable part of the whole.

Frederica Matthewes-Green described the importance of the communal nature of the spiritual life. As an Eastern Orthodox Christian she told me that fasting and feasting are communal disciplines, as are most spiritual practices. We can't sustain our practices alone. We are by nature communal beings and even in silent prayer, hermits, mystics, and ordinary folks like me, need a community of faith and support.

Suzin Green showed me how a mantra can flow from the depths of one's being. And while her mantras were in Sanskrit, I learned from sitting with her that my mantras—my mother tongue of the spirit—are best expressed in the hymns and songs of the Christian church.

Imam Chebli showed me tolerance and care when I showed up at his mosque with my head barely covered. After September 11th, he reached out at an interfaith

gathering and patted my hand when we talked about prayer. He showed me that a life of submission and regular prayer can make a heart warm toward the other. In this case it helped bridge a chasm of fear and distance between a Middle-Eastern Muslim man and a Western Christian woman in a terrible time.

The one person I interviewed who really changed me was Trime Lhamo, Buddhist nun and trustee of Fellowship in Prayer. Trime told me that to meditate is to sit on a chair without expectation. She helped me stop trying to make things happen in meditation or prayer and to cease depending on words all the time. But mostly, Trime taught me, through years of friendship, how humor, honesty, and love bind people together despite differences of belief or practice. I keep a little crystal Buddha she gave me on my desk today as a reminder of the truth I can learn from all I meet.

You're now working as a minister in a large Presbyterian church. Can you tell us how you decided to take this next step?

I can only say the spirit blew me to this church. I've long said that the only church job I'd be interested in is a position focused on the spiritual development of adults. It's a rare position, and one I thought I'd probably never find. But this church and I found each other after I'd lived nearby for a decade but had never darkened its doors. Now, I work with a wonderful congregation and am still asking the same kinds of questions I did at *Sacred Journey:* How do you pray? When have you felt the presence or absence of God? What spiritual practices sustain you? But rather than leave the conversation after an interview is done, I now meet with the same people regularly and together we pray and live our lives in

community. We share and eat. We listen to and proclaim scripture. We often stand in awe and recognize God's presence together.

While I write and read less now then I did at *Sacred Journey*, my voice gets put to use in teaching, preaching, and talking with people during both the mundane and heartbreaking times of life. It's work that takes everything and regularly reminds me that my life can be a channel of hope for someone else from time to time. That's a good and humbling calling. I'm also closer to home and my children each day. I'm happy about that.

What else would you like our readers to know?

I'd like to share the image I now carry with me about multi-faith relationships. I have come to see people of differing religious traditions as neighbors on the same block. We may have and need some fences to show where my beliefs and practices end and yours begin. Boundaries are not bad things. In fact they help define us and protect us. But boundaries are not to become walls that separate us or bar us from coming to the fence to talk. We are to gather at the fence and pass food and stories and wisdom back and forth. We are to be neighborly. And once in a while, we may invite each other to cross through the gate and enter into our religious homes. That is hospitality and a deeply honored spiritual practice in all traditions. We need to be intentional about meeting our neighbors and showing them our lives. Sometimes the friendships will be lasting and deep. Sometimes they will be superficial or fraught with disappointment. No matter. We are interfaith neighbors in this pluralistic world of ours, and we are called to be good ones.

Celebrating the Seder With Abba

Ephraim Buchwald

American Jews who have some traditional background usually speak of "conducting" a Seder. Some use a different expression: They "sweat it out!"

My father, of blessed memory, never "conducted" a Seder, and certainly never "sweated it out." Abba (father) always "prah'vidt" — celebrated a Seder, as he said in Yiddish. William Safire would probably say he exulted, jubilated or reveled in the Seder.

Abba was the type of Jew who feverishly anticipated Passover's arrival, and began preparations for his beloved festival long before the customary 30 days. Born in Poland, and arriving at these shores in 1919 at age 16, Abba vividly recalled (and made certain his "Yankee" wife and 3 children recalled) what it was like preparing for Passover

Ephraim Buchwald is Founder and Director of the National Jewish Outreach Program and Rabbi of the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York City.

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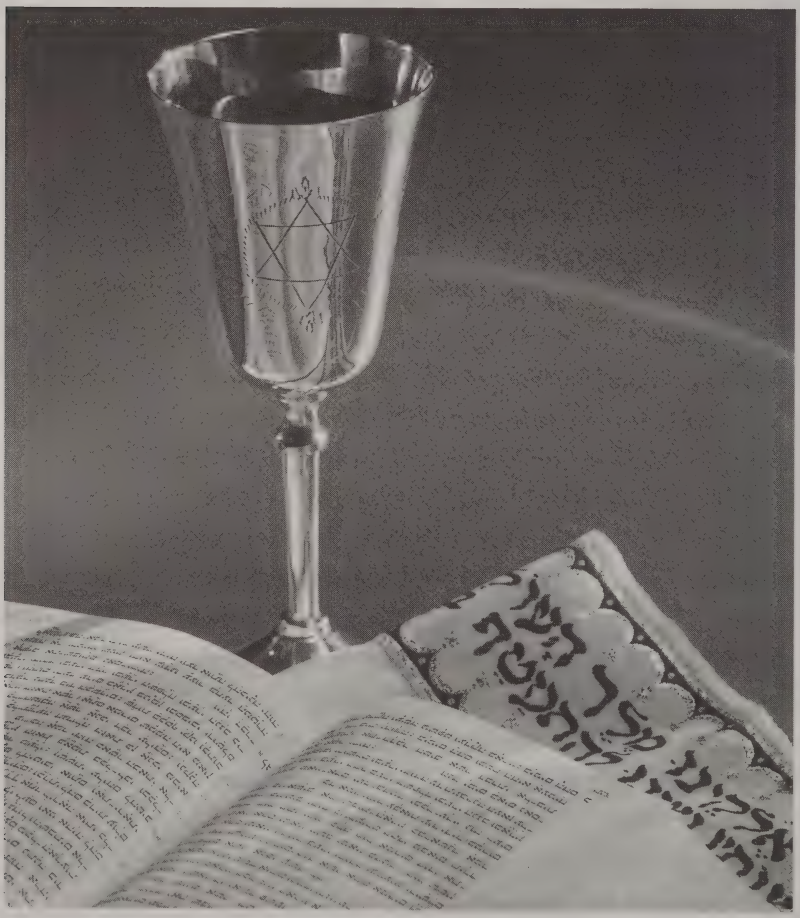
in Biala Podlowska, a small shtetel (*a name given to small villages in Eastern Europe, usually describing an all-Jewish village*) of 10,000 Jews and 4,000 gentiles near Poland's northeastern border with Russia. The house was literally taken apart piece by piece. The straw mattresses were changed with great fanfare. The shtetel Jews were so poor, that it was usually only at Passover time that the Hebrew greeting "Tischadesh" ("wear it in good health") was heard, for those lucky enough to have new clothes especially tailored for Passover.

Abba's vivid memories of Europe never seemed to leave him for even a moment of the 72 years he subsequently dwelt in the USA. My big sister, 12 years my elder, and my little sister, 2 years my elder, and I, watched with eyes aglow, as Abba, usually late in February or early March, started taking down the special corrugated boxes marked "Pesach" in Hebrew, filled with the Passover dishes and utensils. By then, Abba had already prepared his special "Kosher for Passover sink" — a new wooden fruit box obtained from the local market. He built it to fit perfectly in the bathtub, where he washed each Passover plate, glass, spoon, fork, knife and silver utensil with special care and heartfelt devotion.

Abba loved his Passover dishware with a passion. Each year he would, on numerous occasions, excitedly call his wife and children into his Passover "kitchen" to kvell (*to show or express intense pride*) with him over the beautiful long stemmed exotically colored glass which he had just polished to a high sparkle. (Being one of America's all time great bargain hunters, Abba had probably bought the glass for less than a nickel at Gimbel's or Macy's "double close-out basement remnant sale," long before the cellar had become the fashionable boutique it is today.)

Mother prepared the Seder meal with great care, of course, according to Abba's tastes and abundant instructions. There was a palpable sense of excitement when the Seder began, which is probably not uncommon in many homes. But Abba's enthusiasm was so contagious, that each member of our family approached the Seder in an emotional state approaching ecstasy. We truly felt the Divine presence descending.



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The Buchwald family did not "read" the Haggadah (*the book containing prayers and stories for the Passover seder*), we "chanted" the Haggadah text with the special chanting melody Abba had learned in Biala. All of us were expected to master that chant, and Abba would often repeat a portion of the Haggadah if one of the designated readers missed the proper intonation while leading the chanting. Many songs were sung, often in harmony, and amazingly Abba joyfully allowed his younger children to intrude on his Biala traditions by singing the Passover songs we had learned in the Soloveitchik Yeshiva choir. Everyone was expected to lead a portion of the Haggadah reading—even poor mother, whom my father often described as possessing the "dearest" (most expensive) Hebrew, having taken countless Hebrew Ulpan classes with limited success. Inevitably, we would convulse with laughter to tears when mother really savaged a particular Hebrew word in her assigned reading.

Each year Abba would tell the same stories— about the old widow who opened the door for Elijah the Prophet. The sudden light startled the bearded goat who was resting in the back yard. The goat jumped into the old lady's hut, and made shambles of the table. The little old lady, who had already imbibed three cups of wine, begged the "guest": "Reb Elya (Elijah), eat, drink — but please, don't break the dishes!" Or the limerick about Pharaoh losing his pants. It was more than fun; it was more than spiritual. It was Fantasyland come true.

When we received a "slinky" or a climbing-ladder-man as a reward for returning the Afikoman (*the ritual Matzoh that is hidden by the head of household as part of the seder; the service cannot be completed until it is found and returned*)—we children were ecstatic. (Much more

excited by that gift, than the Walkman or CD disc player kids receive today!)

We danced with great fervor at Leshana Haba'a Bi'rushalayim (Next Year in Jerusalem), and sang Adir Hu and Chad Gadyah until the wee hours of the morning. In his traditional steadfastness, Abba would announce each year that if he moved to Israel (which was his lifelong dream), he would insist on celebrating two Seders, because he did not feel that he could fully appreciate only one Seder, being too exhausted from the preparations.

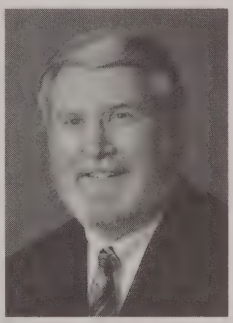
The last year of his life, Abba celebrated his Passover Seder for the first time without his beloved wife of 59 years. He refused to join me or my sisters in Israel. He wanted to be with his beloved Passover utensils. Sure enough, more than a month before Passover, he began his regular ritual of preparation—letting us know at each step how beautiful things looked. And so at age eighty-eight and one-half, he celebrated together with an elderly gentleman friend of his, whom he had invited over for the holiday, and regaled him with his customs, melodies, witticisms, Torah, and the delicious food he had cooked—the traditional Buchwald fare.

Passover without Abba has never been the same—despite the wonderful traditions which he bequeathed to us as our legacy. When Moshiach (*the Hebrew word for Messiah*) comes, I have a sneaky suspicion that it will be Abba who will be called upon to lead the celestial Seder, and make certain that the angels sing with the proper intonations when they chant the Haggadah.

What Would Jesus Do?

William Vincent

"I am indeed a traveler on the spiritual journey. I struggle toward the very same high mountain clearing that every person must eventually reach. The travel instructions that work for me come to me from a source which I call Jesus. The name is not important. The love that inspires us is all that is important."
~ W. Vincent



I received a precious gift from the Holy Spirit, and the messenger who brought this gift was a beautiful child. Justine is now 10 years old and I have known her and her parents since her birth. I saw her in my office recently for a checkup on her heart and I noticed a beautiful rainbow-colored woven bracelet on her arm. The bracelet had the letters "W W J D" on it and I asked Justine what they meant. She smiled and said very softly, "What would Jesus do?" She was wearing this bracelet as a reminder to guide her in each moment of her day, to help her live that moment as Jesus would.

William Vincent, M.D. is several years from leaving his thirty-four-year practice of Pediatric Cardiology, which he still loves. He is inspired to lead small groups to holy sites and to start a spiritual retreat center in San Miguel de Allende in Guanajuato, Mexico. He wishes to remain a doctor for the heart but to move to a new level of communication with those he encounters on the trail of life.

I was inspired by this lovely child's commitment to follow the path of true love and peace. I felt thankful for her family's presence in my life, and the visit was soon over. On many occasions over the next few days I found myself asking that critical question. In this moment, in this situation, with this person or this dilemma . . . what would Jesus do? What a profound question this is.

I discovered that the answer to this question always directs me to choose another way of being, rather than giving me a specific piece of information about what to do. In every instance Jesus would be stillness, perfect love, genuine kindness, true joy, and boundless peace . . . he would be the love of God and nothing else. In each moment, in each circumstance, no matter how compelling or dramatic, he would simply be the constant shining light of God's love. This would be what Jesus would do, and the only thing that he would do.

This is a powerful message, and a clear understanding of what a true Master would do in each moment. But how on earth . . . literally how on earth . . . could I follow such a profound teaching? Any given moment may find me in confusion, in fear or anger, or in need of an important this or that. I experience moments of resistance to his love. But I also experience moments when I am truly willing to follow in his footsteps, and it is in those moments that I am fully at peace. How on earth can I become consistent in doing what love would have me do? Perhaps the real question is: Do I really want to be consistent in choosing love, or do I still avoid this choice for fear of having to give up my priorities and align with the way that love would have me be?

The answer I seek lives in the quiet part of my mind. The power and grace to be the love of God lives in the

holy place in my mind. In this sacred place I am able to follow the simple, clear teaching of Jesus without question and without resistance of any kind. When I make the choice to turn from my habitual "doing" state of mind to quiet mind, it happens in an instant. I am walking with Jesus and I am living my life as he would live it. It is in this choice that I discover what surrender really means.

Surrender means the willingness to step back from my agenda, from what my "wisdom" would direct me to do, and step into another part of my mind that is not run by my thoughts at all. To live this life as Jesus, or Buddha, or any teacher of the truth, would live it means that, in any given moment, I must choose to set aside all my thinking about the contents of that moment . . . and become very still. In this precious stillness I will discover that I am doing precisely what love would have me do. In this heaven-sent silence I am being as my beloved friend would have me be. And in this holy instant, I find a quiet strength and joy beyond all my imaginings. I am truly in the presence of God and filled with God's love.

Learning to choose this loving, healing silence in my mind is accomplished with the same sort of genuine commitment that I had to make to become a bike rider. When I was not yet a bike rider I hadn't had that necessary experience of balance, and I invariably fell off the bike. I repeatedly sought my balance . . . and lost it. With persistence and practice, I suddenly found one day an extended period of balance . . . and I became a bike rider! Any of us can carry that experience of balance to higher levels of living, and strive to stay in balance until it is no longer work at all.

Each of us has a part of our mind that has never been out of balance, a precious part of our mind that is still at

peace with life and with the Creator of all life. This is a healing oasis. It is a place of quiet trust and absolute certainty. Each of us has this inner stillness, this shining silence in which we can walk hand in hand with Love. But we must be willing to practice choosing this state of mind, and to accept losing our balance, and to keep on practicing. If we just persist, one day we will learn to live in balance with what Love would have us be.

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ILLUMINATIONS

Hope is the source and spring of all the alchemies of transformation, the greatest treasure of the heart and mind, the philosopher's stone that transmutes agony and tragedy into new life. Never abandon hope, or you abandon your closest and most helpful guide, the Friend who will be at the door of Paradise smiling as he lets you in.

~ *Rumi*

All religions can learn from each other; the ultimate goal of all religion is to produce better human beings. Better human beings would be more tolerant, more compassionate, and less selfish.

~ *Dalai Lama*

Do not seek death; death will find you, but seek the road which makes death a fulfillment.

~ *Dag Hammarskjold*

Quiet minds cannot be perplexed or frightened, but go on in fortune or misfortune at their own private pace, like a clock during a thunderstorm.

~ *Robert Louis Stevenson*

And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—"Guess now who holds thee?"—"Death," I said, but then the silver answer rang, "Not Death, but Love."

~ *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*
Sonnets from the Portuguese

The Beauty of Dead Trees

Allen S. Maller

I have always been a lover of trees. I love their varied shapes and colors, their branches and foliage. Since the Torah is called a Tree of Life I have also seen trees as a bridge connecting earth and heaven, rooted in tradition while reaching up to draw nourishment from a supernal source.

One summer I began to notice dead trees. I spent several weeks on the Colorado plateau: Zion, Bryce, Canyon De Chelly, and the north rim of the Grand Canyon. The area is arid and many of the dead trees remain standing for generations. The beauty of dead trees suddenly struck me. How could death be beautiful?

The Torah declares that we have a choice between good and evil, between being a blessing or a curse, between life and death (Deuteronomy 30:15,19). We are then commanded to choose life. So how can there be any intrinsic value in death?

Trees are not people and long dead trees do not reflect a severed relationship. Yet perhaps we can learn something from the beauty of dead trees. I share three pictures and thoughts.

Rabbi Allen S. Maller, of Temple Akiba in Culver City, California, hopes this meditation on death will stimulate more such meditations "in the big picture."

To the living-
Death is a wound.
Its name is grief.
Whenever it comes-
Even when there are no tears-
Death is a wound.

But death belongs to life-
As night belongs to day
As darkness belongs to light
As shadows belong to substance-
As the dead tree belongs to the forest
Death belongs to life.

~ *Rabbi Alvin I. Fine*

Allen S. Maller

Allen S. Maller

Some people long dead
I love more than
Many people now alive
Because they were very lovable.

It is true "love is as strong as death."
(Song of Songs 8:6)
Love isn't stronger
Because no matter how much
You love someone
You can't prevent a loved one's death.
But death isn't stronger than love
Because even within death
Love exists
In the heart of the lover.

~ Rabbi Allen S. Maller

There are three ascending levels
Of how one mourns:
With tears-
That is the most basic:
With silence-
That is higher;
With song-
That is the highest.

~ *The Talmud*

Allen S. Maller

Prayer Experiences on a Navajo Reservation

Ernest McDonald

The Prayer Feather

I was out in the woods. Way out. The sun was beginning to set. It is the most spiritually charged time of the day. That old feeling started coming over me. The sense that something was going to happen. A very strange and anxious feeling.

As I walked through the trees, I came upon a peaceful meadow. I stood spellbound by the beauty of the place. All of a sudden, I heard a loud screech coming from a large bird somewhere nearby. I looked across the meadow and on the other side stood a huge tree. Very high. Very old. At the top of this tree was perched the largest hawk I have ever seen. An old bird who had lived a long time. We looked at each other intently as our spirits examined one another. The thought came to me mysteriously that it would be such an honor to receive a Prayer Feather from

Ernest McDonald is the grandson of Cherokees and the adopted son of one of the greatest Navajo elders of the twentieth century. After ten years of traveling in the traditional Native American Spiritual Culture, he has written a series of short stories describing his experiences on the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona. He has also written a book on the subject. He may be reached at elkbrother@yahoo.com.

this great creature. That kind of gift is much coveted among those who love and cherish the old ways. It is big medicine to receive the feather straight from the bird itself.

Just at that moment he let out another loud call and dove from his perch. He passed right in front of me and flew away to the lower trees. Floating gently down behind him as he swooped was a feather. I stood there in amazement as it fell from the sky. Trying to compose myself, I walked calmly across the meadow to the old tree. I began to search. I was so sure that it was left there for me. I was so excited I looked high and low. There was no feather. It wasn't to be seen anywhere. After a long, exasperating search, I finally gave up, reluctantly. I was very upset and disappointed.

As I was packing to leave, I decided to stop and say a prayer of thanks. Bowing my head and closing my eyes, I gave thanks for the beautiful day and for seeing the great bird. The Old Ones say that these majestic creatures are the messengers that carry our prayers to the Great Spirit.

When I finished my prayers I opened my eyes, brushing aside my tears. There under my foot lay the feather.

The Wolf

Three or four days of ceremony and feasting were coming to a close. I thought I was finished and was preparing to leave. My friend came to get me. He told me that I had one more session with the Spirit.

He relayed to me that the Medicine Man had instructed him to tell me to watch for the wolf. That it would come from the west. I of course had no idea what he meant.

He took me to the top of a mountain where snow lay all over the ground. He instructed me to find a place of

Barbara Peakes

my own choosing to meditate. I walked around until I found a place that felt comfortable. There I was to be left alone with my prayers and rituals with the medicine.

I asked him how I would find my way back. He said not to worry, that the Spirit would lead me.

I found myself praying for everyone I could think of, my heart rejoicing at the remembrance of every name. I prayed for the Earth, that it would someday be allowed to heal itself. I prayed for those of us who seem to have such a hard time healing our own selves. What a release it was. To be able to care again. I would find that I had called into being things that would change my life forever.

The snow began to fall. It was so beautiful and quiet. Finally I knew inside that it was time to go. I scanned the horizon and asked the Spirit to help me pick a direction. As I began my walk through the snow, I heard what sounded like a large animal walking beside me to my left. I looked around and could see nothing. There was only a strong sense of a presence nearby. I continued to walk. Again the sound. Finally I stopped and bowed my head in prayer. I asked the Spirit of the medicine if he would help me to understand what was happening to me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw on the ground before me the tracks of a large wolf. I couldn't believe my eyes. The tracks were coming from the west. I obediently followed them and eventually found my way back. Back to the beginning of yet another journey.

PRAYERS

Love Your Life

Live your life that the fear of death can never enter your heart.
Love your life, perfect your life, beautify all things in your life.
Seek to make your life long and of service to your people.
Prepare a noble death song for the day when you go over the great divide.
When you arise in the morning, give thanks
for the light, for your life, for your strength.
Give thanks for your food and for the joy of living.
If you see no reason to give thanks, the fault lies in yourself.
When your time comes to die, be not like those
whose hearts are filled with fear of death,
so that when their time comes they weep and pray
for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way.
Sing your death song, and die like a hero going home.

~ Native American: Chief Tecumseh

The Light of Day

So long as we enjoy the light of day
may we greet one another with love.
So long as we enjoy the light of day
may we pray for one another.

~ Native North American prayer: Zuni

Pray at all Times

The soul that is not nourished by prayer
Is like a tree without soil.
Pray in the woods,
Pray when you plough,
Pray in the fields,
Pray when you dig ditches,
Pray in silence
So that no one can see you.
Amen.

~ Russian Orthodox prayer

Do Not Weep

Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do no stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there. I did not die.

~ Mary Elizabeth Frye

Coming Up For Air

Lyn Burr Brignoli

Two months ago my student, Dragen, a ten-year-old boy with Down Syndrome, was unexpectedly diagnosed with a terminal disease related to another severe, congenital disorder. It could be weeks, it could be a year, the pediatric specialist said to his mother.

"Will you please talk with him about death?" Dragen's mother asks me. I have been his religion teacher for the past four and a half years. I am overwhelmed at the thought of losing him. Although I present a strong face to his mother, I come home from the hospital and cry.

"We can stand around wringing our hands, worrying about what to do next, or we can step back and see what God is doing, watching everything unfold," my friend and spiritual director, Mary Frances, a religious of the Order

Lyn Burr Brignoli was born into the Unitarian tradition in Boston and was received into the Catholic Church at the Easter vigil in 1998. She teaches religion to the Down Syndrome children in her parish. She is a freelance writer who has two grown sons, and lives with her husband in Greenwich, CT.

of Poor Clares, says gently. Somehow Mary's words allow me to move from a place of inner turmoil into a place of inner peace. Her words help me understand that it doesn'tmean giving up on Dragen; rather, it is a matter of getting out of the way, allowing God to work. Somehow, her words encourage me to "put out into the deep" — and to begin a dialogue, of sorts.

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"But he's only a child. A mentally handicapped child. How can you talk with him about death? What can he possibly understand?" an older relative of mine questions.

"I don't know," I reply.

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"I'm going to die tonight, I think." Dragen initiates the conversation one afternoon on coming into the little room where we meet each week. He's home now from the hospital and back at school.

"Oh, Dragen, it's good to die," I answer him. "Everybody's going to die." I am surprised myself how readily the words come out of my mouth. I have had to work hard to be fully present to Dragen without breaking down. "Mommy's going to die and Nanny is going to die. Aunt Dede's going to die." I continue the litany of family and friends. "And Miss Lyn (referring to myself) is going to die."

"I'll go first," Dragen grins.

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I make a cardboard triptych for Dragen that stands about three and a half feet tall. On the outside doors I staple two flowered pillowcases. It looks like a bed. When you open the doors, you see the figure of Jesus with arms out-stretched. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray to Jesus my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray

to Jesus my soul to take" is taped there. I want to convey that, in dying, you go to sleep, and then—you wake up in the arms of Jesus.

But Dragen isn't interested in this triptych. He's far more interested in the one I made of the Stations of the Cross, which depicts the events leading up to the crucifixion. Dragen studies each scene intently, imitating Jesus' posture. Acting out 'The-Way-of-the-Cross' is deeply comforting to Dragen. The irony of this is breathtaking for me. But then, I realize, Dragen has been living his own version of "the cross" all of his short life. When Dragen was born, the attending physician advised his mother to "permit" Dragen to die because of the severity of his birth defects. But Dragen's mother prevailed. She felt strongly that her son was born for a purpose, a child of God who deserved every opportunity to live.

Indeed, Dragen's special charism appears to be a profound intuitive understanding of the cross. On one occasion his mother found him naked on his bed, arms outstretched. "What are you doing?" she asked. "I am Jesus," he said, pointing to the new stoma in his side (surgically implanted to accommodate a catheter), and referring to the spear that pierced Jesus' side. Paradoxically, as Dragen identifies with Jesus, 'The-Way-of-the-Cross' provides a language for him to "speak" about his own pain.

* * * *

Dragen's most recent operation is his fifty-third. When I enter the recovery room, Dragen is doubled up in pain in a fetal position, still groggy from anesthesia. The nurse explains that they cannot administer additional morphine without further complicating matters.

Watching a handicapped child suffer is an

indescribable experience. I find myself torn to shreds, wanting to take his pain into myself. If only I could spare him. I want to call out to God, and I want to cry for myself, too. Instead, I lean over the bed to sing. When I put my face near his, I see, quite unexpectedly, the face of Jesus. Suddenly, I understand that I am looking at Jesus suffer. Moreover, I feel as though I am experiencing Jesus' suffering, not as a voyeur, but as a participant. This suffering child draws me into the core meaning of "the cross" in a way that is still a surprise to me—recalling the very words of the song I am singing to Dragen: "Surprise. Surprise. God is a surprise, right before your eyes, it's baffling to the wise, open up your eyes and see . . ."

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One afternoon Dragen bounds into the little room and can hardly wait to ask, "What is the Holy Spirit?"

"Oh, Dragen," I answer him, "the Holy Spirit is so big, so important. Like the water all around when you are swimming." I am trying to explain, using a language he can grasp, when he interrupts, waving his hands impatiently.

"I know. I know. Could you please tell Nanny (his grandmother)? She doesn't understand." Later, I realize I have seen his grandmother become angry when Dragen says, "I'm going to die."

"Don't say that, Dragen," she chides, as if he has spoken dirty words. The gravity of his condition is too painful for her. But at the same time, I sense Dragen's frustration. If only his grandmother understood, he seems to want to say, she wouldn't be reluctant to talk about it.

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Soon after this conversation, I volunteer to drive Dragen to an early morning appointment at the children's hospital

some thirty miles away. Alone together, we are flying down an open road, both of us singing with abandon. When Dragen sings, a frisson of electricity rushes through his limbs, his head wags, his arms quiver, his hands flap. He reminds me of a great turtle coming up out of the sea.

Blaring full volume on the CD player is a disc, a gift from Marc, an exceptionally compassionate high-school senior who baby-sits two afternoons a week. Marc has taken a genuine interest in Dragen, playing soccer and other games after school, frequently even bringing him home for a meal. But Marc, who came into Dragen's life only recently, is more than a "big brother." Marc is Dragen's best friend.

"Miss Lyn, I have no friends." Week after week Dragen has come to class with this pronouncement, an especially poignant one since he is the only child of a single mother. Moreover, I know of a number of instances at school or day camp when children have even been cruel to Dragen. I think the chronic physical pain he experiences pales in comparison to the emotional pain he feels. Week after week we have prayed together for a friend for Dragen. And now, finally, Marc has come along.

This disc, I realize, is for Dragen a love song from Marc, his best friend, and Dragen is relishing every word. I feel Dragen's exhilaration from the song myself. Whole phrases, "I will get down on bended knee . . . blessings from above . . . to save our love" seem to rise above the pop lyrics, assuming another meaning.

As we drive, the sun is just coming up, back-lighting the dark clouds stretching out across the sky. Suddenly, Dragen points to the golden sky all around us. "Look, Heaven!" he exclaims.

"Oh, yes!" I answer.

"Poppy," he says, indicating his deceased grandfather whom he misses terribly.

"Yes, Poppy's in heaven."

And then with a flourish of his hands, moving his body in an arc he says, "God," as if to imply God is all around us.

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We are having a grand time together. I suppose we both resemble sea turtles coming up for air, wagging our heads from side to side, taking it all in—the sky, the clouds, the sun, the song—as if we have only a few minutes topside. It's as if we both want to feel everything before descending into a cool ocean, dampened by the indifference of the world we live in, a world dead to what ultimately matters.

We continue singing and talking together this way for awhile, our thoughts coming out like dots of color in an impressionist painting, conveying far more than the sum of the dots—far more than mere appearances imply. I don't much speak with him of death; rather, he speaks to me of how to be alive.

Calling

Michael S. Glaser

Sometimes, when I am almost asleep,
I hear, in the back of my head, a voice
calling my name as a question.

It calls out as if in a crowd,
but when I turn in my dream
no one is there.

And the voice returns from time to time, as if
it is waiting, as if I am somehow coming closer
to being the person whose name I bear

as though, if I ever arrive at the place
the voice is calling to,
if I ever fully arrive

I will turn and it will be there,
whispering my name, not as a question
but an affirmation—
grateful and gentle, as in prayer.

Michael S. Glaser is Head of the Division of Arts and Letters at St. Mary's College of Maryland where he is a professor of literature and creative writing.

Live in Love

So live in love.
Do your work.
Make an end of your sorrows.

For see how the jasmine
Releases and lets fall
Its withered flowers.

Let fall willfulness and hatred.

Are you quiet?
Quieten your body.
Quieten your mind.

You want nothing.
Your words are still.
You are still.

By your own efforts
Waken yourself, watch yourself.
And live joyfully.

From the Dhammapada *(The sayings of the Buddha)*

Not the Ripples

Lhaktong Sönam

It's 6:30 A.M. Sunday. The pond behind the lodge stretches, unrippled, under the milky sky. In its deep end, under the cedars' cloud-colored berries, the snapping turtle floats just beneath the surface, head barely touching the roof of his world. I stand alone on the deck, watching. Above and around me, a half-hour before the day's first gong, others wake to our first full day of silence.

Eighteen of us, strangers, have gathered at a small Shambhala Buddhist center nestled on a ridge between the Catskills and the Hudson River. We range in age from late twenties to late fifties. One's a retired state judge, one comes from an organic farm, one has a homemade tattoo on his index finger. Most, but not all, practice with Buddhist groups. The one thing we all share is our commitment to spend this week at a silent meditation retreat.

For me, it's a first. I've been reading about Buddhism for several years; I've been meditating with a local group for a year; I've attended weekend meditation programs; but I haven't yet done a weeklong retreat. I'm coming from a busy spring at work, facing constant pressures

Lhaktong Sönam lives near Princeton, New Jersey.

and deadlines, and I'm definitely ready—as the title of the program says—for "resting the mind."

But I already know that this "resting" is an active resting, a demanding practice. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who brought Shambhala to the West from Tibet, wrote, "Meditation should not be regarded as a vacation from irritation." Even brief meditation sessions bring us nose-to-nose with boredom, regrets, daydreams, all the clouds we wrap around ourselves when it's too disorienting to look up into a completely open sky. The nature of absolute reality, Buddhist teachings tell us, is like that sky—light-filled, joyous, spacious beyond any horizons. We can recognize this as our own nature, as the Buddha did, if we learn to let go of the mental inventions that make us feel so solid.

Here, with no phones, no Internet, no TVs, no novels, just ourselves and twelve hours daily of sitting, walking, eating, and doing odd jobs, we have few distractions from watching our minds. If we get nervous about what we see, we're not going to run to the store, call our friends, or check our e-mail. We'll just sit with it.

As it turns out, we're not even going to nod good morning or gesture you go first. In our silence practice, the program director explains on Saturday morning, we will avoid engaging each other. We will communicate only for emergencies, using notepads. Throughout the week the director will give talks, and we can speak during question-and-answer sessions or discussion groups. Otherwise, no signals, sounds, smiles.

So, in Sunday's early stillness, I turn from watching the pond to walk inside. At the screen door between the deck and the dining room, I nearly collide with the woman who's opening the door outwards. There's a quick

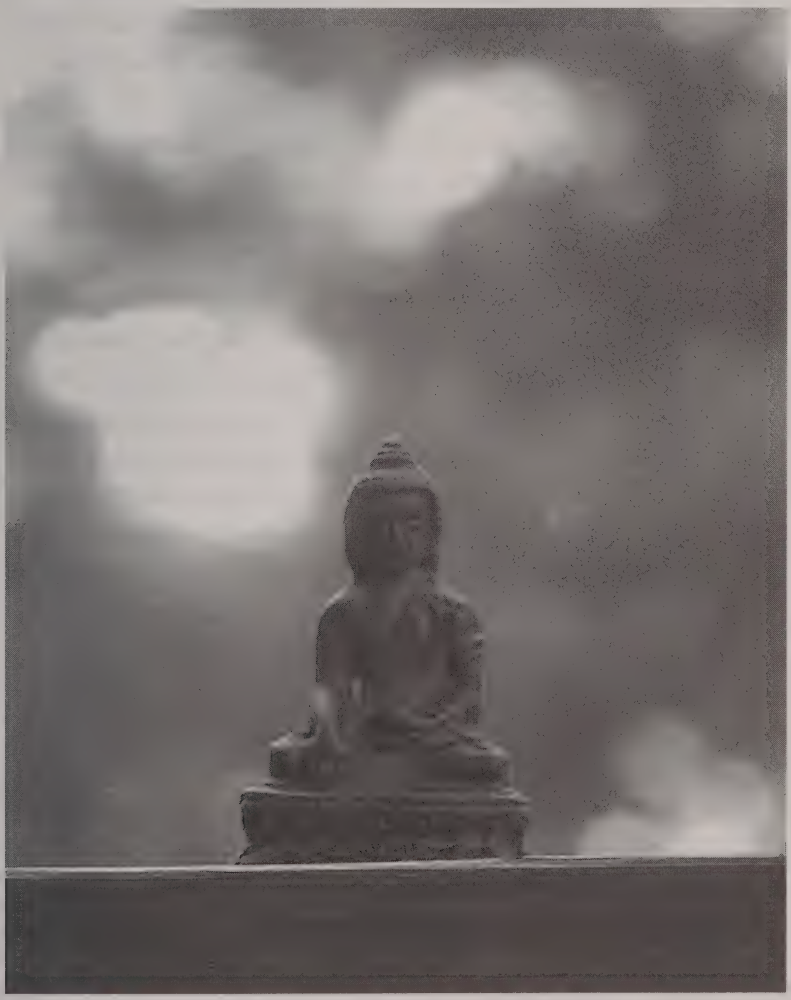
intake of breath—hers, mine, maybe both—and we struggle to avoid each other's eyes. I stand back to let her out, then quickly slip in behind her.

It's awkward, too, as we all line up outside the shrine room, waiting for the gong to signal us to enter, trying to stand an appropriate distance behind the person in front of us, not shuffle our feet, not look around. No one gave us these rules, but it's clear most of us have developed a quick obsession with protocol. If we can't rely on pleasantries to assure us we're doing okay—"Good morning! How did you sleep? Here, let me get that for you"—then we will cling , with all our might, to the Idea of What We Are Supposed to Do.

The meditation itself feels to me equally self-conscious. Settling onto royal blue cushions on a shining pine floor, we begin with one of many techniques for shamatha (calm abiding) meditation: We place our mind on the breath as it comes and goes; we rest our gaze just in front of us, and when thoughts arise, we say to ourselves, "Thinking," and come back to the breath. I seem to be saying "Thinking" with every inbreath and outbreath. My mind seems restless, feverish, frantic. Even walking in the quiet woods during a break, I notice a barrage of thoughts and sensations: Birds calling, my boots crunching on the path, the no-see-ums whining at my ears, my conscience lecturing me about getting back in time for the afternoon sitting. The internal noise is deafening.

As the week progresses, we move to a lighter, more open technique, and it's as if I've emerged from a cave into a sunlit meadow. By Tuesday, thoughts still come and go, but they tread more lightly. So do we, as we become more mindful with less struggle. Now we execute delicate ballets around each other in the hallways, not quite

looking up. And the world is full of magic, grace, color. Tiny purple wildflowers, dewdrops on weeds, spiders in the impatiens, fascinate me. Wednesday morning, as I sit alone on the front porch, a bright red cardinal swoops across my field of vision, while a doe with two fawns picks her way across the grass.



Lhaktong Sönam

And it's not just silent magic. Wednesday night brings a potent thunderstorm—not even one second between blasts of thunder and bolts of lightning that illuminate the entire ridge. The rain, steely-silver in the light from the lodge, pounds at trees and bushes, explodes into the pond. I stand on the porch, watching, every roar and flash rushing through me. I wonder if the doe and her fawns found shelter. One chest-tightening lightning strike, a little too close, urges me back inside, and then the storm subsides. The night returns to stillness; water drips from the eaves.

Thursday morning, as I take my seat in the shrine room, I'm still tingling. Until now, I've said little during discussions, but today I'm energized, and everyone else seems asleep. The director, reviewing some basics, asks questions, and no one responds; so I dive in. She seems startled that I volunteer replies to her first two questions. Then she begins to talk about a text I know by heart. When she asks for the first line, I repeat it. The guy in front of me offers the second. The third? No one speaks, so I answer again. Then, as the director asks for the fourth line, she adds, "Let's hear from someone besides Lhaktong."

I feel slapped, humiliated. A flash of resentment instantly gives way to self-contempt: Just like second grade, all the kids hated me then for always having the answer and people still do, I should keep my mouth shut, how arrogant, I'm a lousy practitioner, I'll never learn. The session's remaining moments stretch out intolerably. I fight the urge to walk out. When the lunch gong sounds, I step mechanically through the line, barely noticing what's on my plate. Tears run down my cheeks as I force bites of salad. Oddly, I watch myself go through this upheaval, realize it's my own creation, but still can't let it go.

Giving up on lunch, I scrape what's uneaten into the compost bin. It's my turn to do dishes, so I immerse myself in the task: Spraying salad dressing and peanut butter off plates, sliding the dish rack into the 180-degree industrial dishwasher, muscling it out with a towel in each hand, drying dishes carefully, stacking them quietly. Somewhere along the way, the steamy physical work becomes my meditation. I don't even notice when the tears stop.

When we return to the shrine room for afternoon sitting, I'm weary, wrung out like a washcloth. As I settle into the cushion and bring my gaze to the shining pine floor, suddenly I see it: The morning's desperate upheaval has come and gone—just a state of mind, pounding storm-like, settling to stillness afterward. Now I am simply here in this bright, fresh moment; things are as they are, everything is possible, all is well. Somehow I feel, in this moment, that this lightness and stillness never go away. Only I go away, and I am learning now to come back.

Silence is lifted for Thursday's dinner. Our chatter and laughter ring across the ridge, into the night, echoing with relief, joy, and an instinctive friendliness for these mysterious others with whom we've shared a remarkable week's practice. Can we take this peace, this deep connectedness, with us? Clearly, that's up to each of us, but I find myself thinking, How could we ever lose it?

Friday morning, before our last sitting, I slip down to the pond's edge, pick up a rock, and throw it in. The ripples spread across and back, rebounding off the sides, becoming smaller and fainter. In moments the surface returns to stillness, the sky opening deep and wide in its reflection, and I think, simply: The pond is not the ripples.

The gong calls me to sit again.

FREDERICK J. OLESSI / CHAIR, EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

A Tribute
Dorothy and Rebecca

I have just read our dearest Rebecca Laird's profoundly moving and parting words to Fellowship in Prayer, and I thought—with great sorrow—how in the major part of their history, so many great religious traditions have so ignored and even denied the fact of female spirituality so evident to those of us who know and love Rebecca. This continues to be done in some cases to the peril of these faiths who are denied the incredible richness of spiritual feeling of that other glorious half of the human race.

I know I will not live to see it finally end, but the end is beginning and those voices are being printed, heard, and savored for the breadth of what they bring to the human condition. And, I am so very proud of *Sacred Journey* which for all of its incarnations over a half of a century has provided a forum for this incredible richness.

One day, so many years ago, in a heated and probably power discussion with my wife and my daughter—the two of them on one part of a sectional sofa, and me on the other part—our cat Dorothy came into the room to observe the exchange of words from a medium position between us. I saw her out of the corner of my eye observing me and them in her most dispassionate and so intelligent manner. But then, she got up and went to sit beside her sisters. Forever and in an instant the game was up for me in that cosmic walk by that sublime cat. And I continue to hope, finally and sometime soon, for all of my brothers on the "journey" who can really make the difference, wherever they be, that. . .

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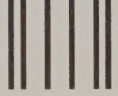

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291 Witherspoon Street
Princeton, New Jersey 08542-3227
Phone: 609-924-6863
Fax: 609-924-6910
Website: www.sacredjourney.org
E-mail: editorial@sacredjourney.org

INTERIM EDITOR
Louise A. Hutner

ASSISTANT TO THE EDITOR
Cecilia F. Rousseau

ART DIRECTOR
Laurel Masten Cantor

PRODUCTION MANAGER
Linda D. Baumann

TRUSTEES EMERITUS
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Vol. 55, No. 2

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ISSN 1096-5939

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